

SUNDAY FEATURES

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When an underground fire killed 35 men at the bottom of a coal shaft last year, the telltale signs of another Chinese mining disaster were everywhere: Black smoke billowed into the sky, dozens of rescuers searched nine hours for survivors and sobbing relatives besieged the mine's iron gate.

But though the owner and local government officials took few steps to prevent the tragedy, they succeeded, almost completely, in concealing it.

For nearly three months, not a word leaked from the heart of China's coal belt about the July 14 explosion that racked the illegal mine, a 300m wormhole in Hebei province, about 160km west of Beijing.

The mine owner paid off grieving families and cremated the miners' bodies, even when relatives wanted to bury them. Local officials pretended to investigate, then issued a false report. Journalists were bribed to stay silent. The mine shaft was sealed with truckloads of earth.

"It was so dark and evil in that place," said the wife of one miner who missed his shift that day and so was spared. "No one dared report the accident because the owner was so powerful."

The Lijiawa mine tragedy might still be an official non-event, but one brave soul reported the cover-up in September on an Internet chat site. The central government in Beijing stepped in, firing 25 local officials and putting 22 of them under criminal investigation. The results of the inquiry are expected this month.

Such a wide-ranging cover-up might seem unusual in the Internet age, but it remains disturbingly common here. From mine disasters to chemical spills, the 2003 SARS epidemic to the past year's scandal over tainted milk powder, Chinese bureaucrats habitually hide safety lapses for fear of being held accountable by the ruling Communist Party or exposing their own illicit ties to companies involved.

Under China's authoritarian system, superiors reward subordinates for strict compliance with targets set from above, like reducing mine disasters. Should one occur, the incentive to hide it is often stronger than the reward for handling it well. A disaster on a bureaucrat's watch is almost surely a blot on his career. A scandal buried quietly may never be discovered.

China's lack of a free press, independent trade unions, citizen watchdog groups and other checks on official power makes cover-ups possible, even though the Internet makes it harder to



A worker at a coal storage facility near the Lijiawa mine near Zhonglou, about 160km west of Beijing. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

to crawl out of the tunnel, Zhou said. Only three or four survived.

Zhou said the mine owner, Li Chengkui, enlisted him to deal with the victims' families. He wanted the relatives split up so they would not "kick up a row," Zhou said.

Over the next few days, Li or his managers struck deals with the families: 800,000 yuan, or about US\$120,000, if the miner was local; half that much if the miner was a migrant worker. Both sums are relatively high by local standards, reflecting the owners' eagerness to suppress complaints. Locals were given more because of their presumed propensity to cause more trouble, Zhou said.

The widow of a miner named Yang Youbiao said she was hustled from the mine to a local hotel, then to a hotel in another county and finally to a third county. There she picked up her husband's ashes, she said, even though she had wanted to bury his body. She asked that her name not be published for fear of retribution.

"They just gave us the ashes and told us to go," she said, quietly weeping. "I don't even know if the ashes belong to my husband."

Zhou Jianghua's brother survived the explosion, but suffered severe brain damage from lack of oxygen. At 37, he is a semi-invalid, said Zhou, who is no relation to Zhou Xinghai. He said his family was offered 200,000 yuan if they agreed not to sue the mine owner or speak to reporters, but never reached an agreement.

In September, an Internet posting pleaded for justice. The writer said he had repeatedly reported the accident to the authorities.

"No feedback for over 70 days!!!" he wrote. Instead, callers threatened him. But weeks later, Hebei's governor disclosed the accident at a work-safety conference. The Beijing news media subsequently reported that 25 officials had been fired, an official report had been faked and dozens of journalists had taken bribes. Now the central government is busily trying to make an example of Yu County by shutting down illegal mines. A new cast of officials is in charge.

But Yang Youbiao's widow says she does not believe culpable officials will be punished.

"They can find ways to avoid it," she said. "There won't be any end to this kind of tragedy."

Workers at a coal storage facility in Yu County in China's Hebei Province. PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

From mine disasters and chemical spills to last year's scandal over tainted milk powder, China's lack of a free press and other checks on government and big business make cover-ups possible, even in the age of the Internet

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suppress information completely.

Work-safety officials in Beijing complain that even more than in other industries, death tolls from accidents at coal mines are often ratcheted down or not reported at all. That is because of the risky profits to be made — by businessmen and corrupt local officials — exploiting dangerous coal seams with temporary, unskilled workers.

Just two weeks after the Lijiawa disaster, for example, officials in neighboring Shanxi province announced that 11 people had been killed in natural landslide. After another Internet-lodged complaint, investigators discovered that 41 villagers had been buried under a torrent of rocks and waste from an iron mine.

Even if underreported, the official death rate for China's coal mines is astronomically high. On average, nine coal miners a day died in China last year — a rate 40 times that of the US, according to the State Administration of Work Safety. Small mines,

legal and illegal, accounted for three-fourths of the deaths but only a third of production.

To be sure, the mines are much safer than just six years ago. Huang Yi (黄毅), the deputy administrator of the work safety agency, said stricter scrutiny, regulations and the closing of 12,000 mines had cut the death rate by three-fourths since 2002. "There are some illegal coal mines that still operate because they are protected by local officials," Huang said. But, he added, "There are fewer and fewer."

Hu Xingdou (胡星斗), an economics professor at the Beijing Institute of Technology, argues that Beijing's top-down approach can only do so much to make local officials more accountable.

"We don't have the grass-roots democracy; we don't have independent labor unions; we don't have checks and balances; we don't have any system of official accountability," he said.

Work-safety officials are trying to fill the gap with hot lines, a Web site link, and even rewards to informants. But in a country that relies on coal for most of its electricity, powerful financial incentives lie behind unsafe mines.

China Labor Bulletin, a Hong Kong-based nongovernment group that advocates workers' rights, estimates that even a small Chinese coal mine producing just 30,000 tonnes a year of coal can make about US\$900,000 a year in profit. In 2005, the central government ordered officials to divest themselves of their holdings in mines

that they supervised. But Hu said, "Many officials still own shares."

Here in Yu County, where roads divide towering pyramids of coal and the poor rake the ravaged land in search of loose chunks, local officials were widely assumed to be in league with mine operators. According to one local government official, nearly half of the county's 200 mines operated illegally last year. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the subject is politically delicate.

"Everyone in Yu County thinks this accident was very typical," he said. "If Mao was still in power, these local officials would be executed."

The Lijiawa mine's single shaft was no secret. It stood virtually in the shadow of a five-story state-owned mine. Even though its owners lacked all six required licenses, it operated on state property for more than three years, the official said.

Zhou Xinghai helped recruit migrant workers from hundreds of kilometers away to work the seams.

The monthly salary of about US\$600 was high for migrant labor, but so were the risks.

In May, he said, miners were dismayed to discover that 59 mules had died from unventilated mine gas. Some oxygen cylinders were on hand in case of emergencies, he said, "but we didn't know how to use them."

Last July, five tonnes of explosives stored illegally in the mine caught fire, trapping workers hundreds of meters underground with only a megaphone to summon help. Many suffocated trying



No checks, no balances